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Our savvy Manila team

As the decaying Ferdinand Marcos regime staggered to its doom in the Philippines, most of the credit for a rebirth of freedom must go to the courageous commitment to democracy of millions of Filipinos. Their determination to vote in the face of intimidation and to defend the results with their lives made Mrs. Corazon Aquino's victory possible.

But some of the credit for creating a new beginning belongs to a group of four policy-makers in the upper levels of the Reagan administration. Working in close cooperation with one another, they had recognized by the time of Benigno Aquino's assassination in 1983 that the Marcos regime had become so corrupt and incompetent that it would either have to be drastically reformed or replaced.

Based on accurate intelligence reporting, they concluded that the rapid growth of the Communist Party of the Philippines and of the New People's Army set a strict time limit on any effort at reform. To wait for events to take their course would only ensure the triumphal march into Manila of the NPA even before President Reagan's second term was finished.

This team of four key policy-makers included Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage, Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz, National Security Council staffer Gaston Sigur, and chief of the State Department's Philippine desk, John Maisto. With the help of many others in the U.S. Embassy in Manila and in the defense and intel-

ligence communities, they put together and sold to their superiors a strategy of escalating pressure on Mr. Marcos to force him to make the necessary changes in time.

The first priority was the retirement of the chief of staff, Gen. Fabian Ver, and his corrupt cabal of overage generals, who were ruining a once-proud Philippine military establishment. Replacement of Gen. Ver and his cronies by competent professional soldiers was seen as the first essential step toward rebuilding an armed force capable of using U.S. aid effectively to cut the NPA down to size.

Of almost equal priority was the need to replace the dictatorial rule of President Marcos's KBL party with a genuine two-party system. The democratic opposition would then have a real alternative instead of being forced into the arms of the CPP.

Finally, the third essential reform was the restructuring of the econ-

omy to eliminate the agricultural monopolies that Mr. Marcos had granted his "crony capitalists." This hugely profitable favoritism was clearly strangling the productive capacity of the economy.

Once the top levels of the administration were convinced of the reality of the Communist threat and realized the need for far-reaching reform, the team of four went to work to brief the key congressional committees in order to ensure a solid base of bipartisan support. As a result, a mounting congressional demand for overdue reform was directed at the Malacanang Palace and the threat of cuts in military and economic aid became an increasingly potent weapon in dealing with a reluctant Mr. Marcos.

As this escalating campaign reached its peak in the form of Nevada Republican Sen. Paul Laxalt's visit to Manila carrying an urgent letter from President Reagan himself, Mr. Marcos moved to deflect the pressures. He suddenly called a snap election for Feb. 7, in the belief that he would win big and could then use his mandate to quiet the American complaints.

Instead, Mrs. Aquino's remarkable ability to rally and unite the democratic opposition has transformed the situation. Her victory has at last made possible the military, political, and economic reforms that Mr. Marcos was unable and unwilling to make.

In a protracted Third World crisis that threatens the loss of vital American air and naval bases, the United States has for a change played its cards to date with superior timing

and diplomatic skill.

By contrast, both the Soviet Union and the CPP appear to have blundered badly. The Soviet ambassador in Manila hurried to congratulate Mr. Marcos on his re-election and warned him that the Americans were treating him just like they treated all their friends.

While the Soviets are now trying to disentangle themselves from this premature attempt to curry favor with a departing dictator, the CPP succeeded in further antagonizing Mrs. Aquino by boycotting the election and trying to prevent her from winning.

Their tactical blunders do not, however, remove the long-term Communist threat to the Philippines. Mrs. Aquino and able Gen. Fidel Ramos face a major challenge in rebuilding the Philippine army. But at least now the possibility of constructive change is not darkened by Gen. Ver's corrupting shadow.

The Filipino people have won for themselves a new deal, and the Reagan administration will find the American people anxious to help in every possible way.

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